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Hong Kong

Market Development Reports

Bird Flu Update from Hong Kong

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Report Highlights:

To arrest the spread of Avian Influenza among chickens and to protect public health, the Hong Kong government has decided to destroy all live poultry ready for the market within the next two weeks. This decisive action was prompted by the fact that many more chickens have died of influenza in seven local wet markets subsequent to the slaughter of 6000 chickens in three other local wet markets on May 16. Retail stalls for live poultry will be closed for at least four weeks.

Includes PSD changes: No
Includes Trade Matrix: No
Unscheduled Report
Hong Kong [HK1], HK

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To arrest the spread of Avian Influenza among chickens and to protect public health, the Hong Kong government has decided to destroy all live poultry ready for the market within the next two weeks. This decisive action was prompted by the fact that many more chickens have died of influenza in seven local wet markets subsequent to the slaughter of 6000 chickens in three other local wet markets on May 16. Retail stalls for live poultry will be closed for at least four weeks. The Secretary for Environment and Food stressed that this strain of virus will not affect human beings and is different from the one in Hong Kong in 1997. There was a slight negative effect on sales of frozen chicken over the week end.

This action has been orchestrated by the Hong Kong Environment and Food Bureau, which directly supervises operations conducted by its subsidiary departments, Food and Environmental Hygiene Department and Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department. With the experience of bird flu crisis in 1997, the operation this time has thus far been well planned and conducted systemically. The depopulation operation at the retail and wholesale levels were completed on May 19 and 20, destroying a total of 191,000 poultry including chickens, ducks, geese, pigeons and quail. All poultry were slaughtered in order to avoid cross contamination and they were sent to landfill for disposal. All stalls were cleaned and disinfected.

The slaughtering of chickens in farms will start on May 21 and is expected to be completed within 2 weeks. Although all live chickens on local farms have not been infected with the virus, all retail outlets for live birds will be closed for at least 4 weeks. Veterinary advice attests that if these birds were left in cages for a prolonged period they would die, so there is a need to destroy birds in the local farms. As such, the government is not going to destroy all birds but only those which are mature enough for retail during the following four weeks when the retail outlets are closed. There are 207 farms in Hong Kong with a total poultry population amounting to 1,060,000 head.

The government is prepared to make ex-gratia payments to the affected parties, amounting to US\$10.3 million or HK\$80 million. Compensation of HK\$34 for each chicken, HK\$30 for a pigeon and HK\$8 for a quail will be paid to farmers.

Although the importation of live poultry from China is suspended, chilled and frozen poultry can be imported into Hong Kong as usual. Sources indicated that sales of frozen poultry products over the weekend dropped slightly without any significant indications. However, it is still too early to estimate the effect. Meanwhile, the USA Poultry & Egg Export Council has distributed promotion materials to retailers to assist consumers on how to identify US products.

Hong Kong consumers generally do not overreact to the whole exercise partly because memories of the bird flu crisis in 1997 are still fresh and they are getting used to "food safety" issues. Also, the Hong Kong government has been open and transparent in handling the whole crisis. However, there are calls for the government to seriously consider a central slaughtering policy for poultry. It is expected that the Hong Kong government will launch a community wide consultation exercise on this policy in the near future.